Branches

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Branches

by SleepsWithCoyotes

Summary

Dumping place for short, not-chronological snips set in the "Sustenance" world.

1. The one where Will is a good boyfriend.
2. The one with the badass Mama Lecter.
3. Young Hannibal and Mischa, and Young!Hannibal and !Misha.
4. Fathers and daughters.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

When You Say Crown (I Think Keter)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes a few days--all right, Will's lying; it takes one--to realize Hannibal is sticking quite stubbornly to his human form, even now that Will knows what lies beneath it. Beyond it? He's honestly not too clear on that point, just that Hannibal is for some reason only showing the side of himself the whole world knows. Hannibal can't possibly have any remaining concern that Will will run screaming at the sight of him...although if Hannibal promises to catch him, running may be a--well, a topic for later discussion.

Focus, Graham.

It can't be shame, because Hannibal doesn't know the meaning of the word. And they've been...working. On the other thing.

Hannibal has been very patient and very skilled about walking him through it.

So it's not that it takes Will a few days to notice. It's just that it takes the better part of a week for him to break down and ask.

Will catches him in the early morning, after they've crawled out of bed and into a shared shower but before Hannibal can dress. Hannibal is as much a peacock as ever, though he's made concessions to the much warmer climate: thinner fabrics, lighter colors. That doesn't means he'll be eager to ruin a suit he actually deems acceptable if he takes Will's question as encouragement.

Hannibal is just opening the door to the frankly ridiculous walk-in closet when Will steps in close and molds his palm to the small of Hannibal's back. "Hey," he murmurs, chin tucked so his lips brush skin as he speaks. Hannibal hums contentedly, leaning back just enough to better feel him there, and Will wraps his other arm around Hannibal from behind. Sex--with Will specifically, he'd like to think--turns Hannibal into a big, purring cat. He hopes he's not about to break that lazy contentment with what he's about to ask. "I was...sort of wondering. Why you stick to this shape. Now that I know and all. Is it...are you...?"

Is he worried others will see? That Will will see--and change his mind? He was raised by humans...does he not like the reminder that he's not? Will presses his mouth harder to the back of Hannibal's shoulder with a frown, the thumb resting low on Hannibal's stomach ruffling the sleek trail of hair there.

He feels Hannibal's low chuckle all through his own chest.

"All right," Hannibal murmurs, briefly covering the hand on his belly with his own. "Come. Stand just there," he asks as he leads Will to the door of their bedroom, pointing to a spot out in the hall. Will arches a brow, wary of a trick, but goes to stand where he's directed.

Hannibal doesn't hesitate to transform, the transition from human to other as seamless as it was the first time. One moment he's in his familiar shape--a tall, broad-shouldered figure just beginning to acquire the comfortable padding of a man approaching his fifties--and in the next he looms. The contours of ropey muscle softened in his other form lie stark against the bone beneath unnaturally-dark skin, tightening visibly to hold up the weight of a massive crown of antlers as they sprout and spread. Blank white eyes watch him without blinking, but Hannibal's face remains relaxed. He doesn't seem worried about Will's reaction, so if that's not the source of his hesitance, then--

Hannibal takes one step closer, then another. As tall as he is, he has to duck to fit through the doorway, and when he does--

The points of Hannibal's antlers hit the wall to either side with an audible *clack*.

Will's eyes go wide, seeing the problem in an instant: not distrust or discomfort but simple logistics. He opens his mouth to let Hannibal know he gets it, but then Hannibal tilts his head, cheek nearly resting on his shoulder, and--

Clack.

At any other time, Will would be embarrassed by the helpless, high-pitched noise he makes, somewhere between a surprised squeak and a strangled giggle. He cuts it off savagely--he's not going to laugh; he's *not*--but then Hannibal turns his head and tries to edge through sideways, and--

Clack.

Will loses it, laughter bursting from him so hard it doubles him over, leaves him staggering back to brace against the wall to say upright. "Oh my God," he gasps out, one arm wrapped around his middle as the other gropes along the wall for purchase. "I thought...I thought maybe you...oh, Jesus."

Hannibal straightens with a smile...and calmly shuts the door between them.

Will gapes for maybe ten seconds before jolting away from the wall.

"Hannibal?" he calls through the heavy paneling, rapping nervously even as he tries the knob. It turns, but the door doesn't open; Hannibal must be holding it shut. "Oh, come on! I wasn't laughing at you! Okay, I was laughing at what you were doing--but you knew I would! You made me stand in the hall!"

Through the door he hears Hannibal's soft chuckle, not angry at all, the bastard. Will rolls his eyes. That doesn't stop him from trying the door again.

This time Hannibal lets him in.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the title is a SCP Foundation reference.

The Sowers

Chapter Summary

The reality is more like a fairytale.

Chapter Notes

I can't call it a dumping-place if there's only one chapter, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Simonetta Sforza-Lecter is a woman used to getting what she wants. Top marks in school, acceptance to the best universities, invitations to all the right parties. When at one such gathering she makes the acquaintance of the dashing Count Lecter, she pursues him with no thought of failure until he falls, bemused but delighted, into her arms.

"My Diana," he calls her through the first charmed years of their marriage. His friends hate him cheerfully for having the good sense to be snared by such a beauty, though they're all a little in awe of her drive.

"Her family ruled Milan for centuries," they remind each other, as if she needs explaining. "On both sides."

Her husband smiles and shrugs when asked if he finds it difficult to live with such a *decisive* personality. "Fair Artemis' arrows strike where they will."

"Don't you mean Aphrodite? Or Cupid, actually?"

He laughs, and with a wide, white grin, says, "Love can be fickle. The spoils of the hunt, you keep."

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Count Lecter has never seen his wife in tears and doubts he ever will. Her eyes flash when she's wounded, and she bares her teeth at grief. When she returns from the doctor with her perfect lips curled into a delicate snarl, only he can read the hurt that lurks beneath.

"What is it, my Diana?" he asks, taking both her hands in his and pressing them to his heart.

"More like your Guinevere," she snaps, and it all comes pouring out: the complacency that turned to worry, then suspicion; the carefully-timed seductions he'd never questioned,

grateful as always to have remained her favorite prey. In the moment of realization, his sorrow is mainly for her. He wants children, of course--they've talked about it for years--but he aches to know his darling's own body is the first opponent she can't defeat by will alone.

"Well," he says gingerly, "there are always surrogates. I could--"

But, in a turn that surprises them both, he can't. His doctor delivers the news with cringing sympathy, quick to shove pamphlets on the joys of adoption into his hands. "For when you tell your wife," the doctor explains with a nervous smile.

He thanks the man and makes a note to acquire a new physician.

Simonetta listens attentively as he explains the situation, plans already taking shape behind her eyes. "It complicates matters, I suppose," he admits, uncertain what conclusions she's coming to and hoping only to tempt her into moderation. "Not so much the title, really, but the trappings of it; it'd all go to the next male of the blood first. But, well, there is my brother."

"I've met your brother," Simonetta scoffs. "He doesn't strike me as a man eager for children--whereas Murasaki might well challenge us for them. No, there's only one option I can see that won't risk our child fighting for his inheritance should the worst happen."

"Darling," the Count chides gently, "you can't just *steal* a child."

"Oh," Simonetta says, pleasantly surprised. "Two options, then."

"My love--"

This time she takes his hands, raising each in turn to her lips, blue eyes spearing his without blinking. "Will you agree to abide by the terms of whatever pact I strike?"

His hands clench tight around hers before he swallows his fear and gentles his grip. "What do you intend to do?"

"I've heard tales of the forests around our home, of She who walks there and Her innumerable children. It seems to me," Simonetta says with a sharp, fierce smile, "if you're going to beg a boon of fertility, look to the one best able to grant it."

He can deny her nothing, of course.

"Do as you will," he promises, "so long as you come back to me."

"I will," she swears, leaning up to kiss him lightly on the lips.

"*With* your mind," he insists, trailing after her as she goes to fetch her walking boots, her rifle and her sacrificial knife.

"Of course."

"I love you," he calls after her, watching from the front steps as she strides determinedly into the trees.

He sighs, his own eyes prickling with unshed tears. He'd accompany her, but he knows how these things go. Alone, mother to would-be mother, his love is almost certain to prevail. With him in tow, well. That becomes a different story, and he's not so great a fool as to force her to decide which sacrifice to choose.

He'd rather not deal in sacrifices at all, but some things can't be helped.

***

The woods are lovely, dark and deep, and also far too quiet. Little moves beneath the branches, but the silence is sleepy, not fearful. Simonetta knows it would've been easier to wait until nightfall, that she'd have been far more likely to find what she seeks by moonlight, but whatever advantage she manages to claw for herself, she means to keep.

She also knows better than to approach one of the Old Ones empty-handed. She's grateful beyond measure that her husband made no offer of assistance--a *willing* sacrifice would be an insult to keep--but that leaves her with few ideas for what to offer in his place. What sort of gift would tempt the mother of a thousand to hear her prayer?

Her eyes narrow when she spots the stag: a fine old buck a little past its prime, heavy with muscle but favoring one foreleg. It comes to her suddenly that a thousand young means a thousand hungry mouths to feed, and she knows just what to do.

The stag is a lovely specimen, but all she sees in that moment is meat.

She fells it cleanly with a single shot to the head. It dies almost instantly, without fear or suffering; she can only hope the intended recipients won't find the fare too bland.

Up close the beast is more massive than she thought, far too heavy for her to drag. She hesitates only a moment before drawing the knife she'd brought to make sacrifice with. If she's lucky, intent will be enough to draw the one she seeks to her. If not, she can always take the heart.

She's up to her wrists in gore when stealthy movement from the corner of her eye draws her notice. Whatever it is, it's small and dark--two small, dark somethings, peering out from behind a tree. One gives a faint, high whine that's shushed by a breathy growl as both figures freeze.

Making no sudden moves, Simonetta pulls her hands free of the carcass, the stag's heart cupped in her palm, and slowly turns her head.

They're odd little things, naked and bald as babes, with blank, white eyes like boiled eggs. The bigger of the two is black as carbon, with two small buds like a goatling's horns protruding from the crown of his head. He has one arm wrapped protectively around his sister's shoulders from behind, ignoring the way she mouths at his arm, as reflexive as a human child sucking her thumb. Bark-brown, she sports two little buttons in place of her

brother's growing antlers, and while neither of them have an ounce of baby fat on them, where the brother has the beginnings of wiry muscle stretched on his skinny bones, the sister just looks starved.

Swallowing a rush of pity that threatens to close her throat, Simonetta smiles at them closed-mouthed. "Hello, there," she says quietly, keeping perfectly still as they flinch at the sound of her voice. "It's all right. I'm not here to hurt you. Are you hungry?" She has no idea whether they understand her at all, but holding out the heart she just harvested should need no translation.

The brother hesitates, but the little girl's whine and the ferocious rumble of her stomach spur him to action. Darting forward, he snatches the heart from Simonetta's hand, but instead of stuffing it into his mouth, he skitters back to his sister. Shoving the still-warm hunk of muscle into her hands, he curls over her, growling softly, as if he expects someone to come along and steal her food.

Jaw clenched, Simonetta draws her empty hand back as it slowly curls into a fist. She's doubly glad now that she brought her knife, because if anyone, *anything*, lays a single finger on these children, she'll rip them open and hang their guts from the trees, so help her God.

The boy cocks his head at her curiously, arms loosening a little as his sister gnaws contentedly at her meal.

"You're a good brother," Simonetta murmurs. This time neither of them flinch. "Would you like to come home with me? Both of you. You'd be safe there. And fed."

The boy looks from her to the carcass and back. It's a risk turning away from them, but she doesn't care. When she offers him the stag's liver, the boy creeps forward, accepting it politely from her hands. Retreating back to his sister, he watches her intently as he eats, but she senses no threat in his unwavering stare.

After he finishes, he licks his fingers clean with the fastidiousness of a cat, then glances briefly down at his sister. Turning back to Simonetta, he cocks his head, blinks once, and *changes*: skin paling out to a healthy pink, irises rising out of the milky depths of his eyes. They're more red than brown, and his scalp is still smooth, only one antler bud vanishing in his imperfect attempt at mimicry, but Simonetta's heart lurches in her chest at the *possibilities*.

The little girl looks up, sees her brother's transformation, and breaks into a bloody, sharp-toothed grin of perfect sweetness. She mimics him just as effortlessly, down to the single horn, but when Simonetta's breathless gasp draws her attention, she sprouts a wild tangle of baby-fine curls.

"Do you have names?" Simonetta asks, heart thumping hard against her ribs. She was supposed to make a pact, but maybe this is her answer. Maybe her sacrifice has been accepted by proxy. Or maybe She has too many children already to care what happens to these two.

The girl looks expectantly to her brother, who stares back at Simonetta with helpless consternation, as if he understands but lacks the vocabulary to reply.

"Then you can be Mischa," she says to the girl, voice cracking on the name chosen years before, this for a daughter and that for a son. "If that's all right. And you...you can be Hannibal."

They don't answer with words, but when she leaves the woods hours later, it's with Mischa balanced on her hip, Hannibal's small hand clasped trustingly in her own.

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Hannibal wisely holds his tongue as Will storms into the bedroom, the rage Will's been bottling up so as not to frighten his newest stray blazing free at last. The dog, fed and freshly-bathed and stitched up by Hannibal's own hand, lies fast asleep in a nest of blankets in the den, blissfully unaware of the fury her treatment has inspired. As for the men tormenting her, they'll keep until the altercation becomes a local legend, then forgotten: the foreigner with the scarred face and bleeding heart who stole a dog no one wanted in the first place.

Will peels off his shirt, stuck to his skin from the dog's unplanned bath, and hurls it across the room. Though he knows better, Hannibal smiles. The carefully-masked snarl, the minute trembling of fisted hands, the sudden shift to decisive action that swept Hannibal along in its wake...the Will of the last few hours is so achingly familiar, Hannibal has no defense against the nostalgia that rises up.

"My mother would have loved you," he says before he can think better of it, wondering too late if he should school his expression as Will turns on him. "The human one, I mean. You remind me of her in many ways."

To his surprise, rather than finding a new target, Will's anger gutters in the wake of Hannibal's confession. Scowl turning uncertain, the tight clench of Will's jaw eases as he traps his lower lip between his teeth. Curiosity wars with concern, but at Hannibal's encouraging look, the former prevails. "Can you tell me about her?" Will asks, holding out a hand that invites Hannibal to come to him, as if he and not Will needs comforting right now.

Hannibal, no fool, closes the distance between them at once. Any excuse to pull Will into his arms is a good one.

"What did you want to know?" Hannibal asks, nosing at Will's damp curls. He smells of dog and blood and hot, musky rage, and though Will squirms a little in embarrassed awareness of that fact, he doesn't pull away.

"Anything. I've always wondered at the sort of people who'd stumble across two eldritch beings and just think 'babies!'"

Will sounds nervous, as if he's afraid he's overstepped his bounds or that his statement will be misconstrued, but Hannibal chuckles. Where does he even start? With their patient tutelage in how to pass for human without ever implying they were lesser, their natures undesirable? With the games he and his sister were taught, the gentle insistence that they could *be* children if they wanted, that nothing dire would happen if Hannibal wasn't constantly on the watch for danger or their next meal? Their mother's impassioned defense, and the unshakeable bedrock of their father's support.

He'll tell Will all these things and more if he truly wants to know, but for now he presses his lips to the crown of Will's head, overtaken by an unexpected wave of sadness. He misses them still.

"They were good people," he says as Will's arms tighten, pulling him closer, and that is familiar too.

Chapter End Notes

Alternately known as, "OMG, Hannibal, You Married Your Mother," "All His Weirdness He Learned From the Humans," and "'Babies!' is the Only Correct Response, Actually."

The Reapers

Chapter Summary

Young Hannibal and Mischa, in all senses of the word.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first he is wordless, nothing but hunger and a collection of sensations: *warmth, quiet, contentment.* He doesn't realize the hunger is conditional, that the warmth is another body curled into the hollow made by his own, that his contentment hinges on the small space of safety that rings him about.

Then the darkness unfurls, rises with a bone-popping stretch and strides away, uncaring of the chill that rushes in in its absence. He blinks into the shadows, staring after the fading sounds of rustling and snapping, feeling small and exposed.

The little ball of warmth he's huddled around pushes into his belly as if trying to crawl inside him. It whimpers, faint and strained. It smells like him and also of the sheltering dark, so he holds it more tightly.

They wait together for the darkness to return, but instead the world grows brighter. The back of his neck prickles as formless knowing settles over him: it would not be good to be seen.

He sits up. The little shape he's been curled around is the same color as the tall things that surround them. That gives him the idea to pick it up, carry it to a hollow where one of the tall things splits at the bottom into curving shapes that burrow and dig and drop out of sight. The hollow is full of dry bits of stuff that crackle beneath their weight, and their arrival sends small things with many legs skittering away in every direction.

Little-Him grabs a fat, shiny black one and stuffs it in its mouth, only to make a face and spit it out a moment later. Curious--why did it do that?--he pinches the hard back of a scurrying thing between his fingers and lifts it to his nose for a thoughtful sniff. *YES*, says the gaping pit in his middle with a startlingly loud rumble. Little-Him jumps at the sound, colorless eyes rounding, and makes a high, breathless sound that curls the corners of his mouth up.

He puts the futilely-paddling thing he caught into his mouth without thinking, then scrapes it off his tongue with a grimace. The crunch was oddly satisfying, but the *legs*--!

The aching hole inside him complains, vocally, Little-Him echoing it back with a soft whine. Hungry. He's hungry, and if he is, then Little-Him must be hungry as well. Surely there must be nicer things to eat, with fewer nasty legs.

He huffs when Little-Him tries to follow him out of the hollow, his hackles crawling with unease at the thought. Little-Him is half his size, small enough he could crunch it up like one of the little skittering things, and he doesn't want it crunched up. It smells like him, so it must be *his*.

Not safe, he tries to communicate through wordless growls and gentle nudges, and it seems to understand. Sitting back on its heels, it blinks at him forlornly. It doesn't want him to go. *I'll return. Stay.*

When he's sure it won't follow, he creeps out into the light, taking cautious sniffs of the air. There are dry things that tickle his nose, wet things that stick in the back of his throat, and somewhere close a sleepy, savory warmth.

He follows that final scent, down a little hill and up one of the tall things, his short, sharp claws digging in deep. There's another sort of hollow halfway up, and though he can't see much from where he clings, what's inside smells delicious.

He sticks his hand inside and yelps as something sharp and strong closes around his finger. Yanking his hand back, he nearly loses his grip as something comes with it: a brown and grey *something* that falls, lands with a crack, and lies still. He stares down at it for a long moment, licking the blood from his wounded finger, almost afraid to try again. Then he thinks of Little-Him waiting and gathers up his courage.

There are small, smooth things inside that squirm as he fishes around, but they're warm and soft and only have four legs, so he balls them all up in a single fist and makes his way back down, careful not to drop any. The big one lies where it landed, and he takes that one too--gingerly, by the tail, in case it tries again to bite.

He gives the soft things to Little-Him, who eats them up quick, and takes the big thing for himself. The soft pelt that covers the thing is tricky, and the tasty part beneath requires him to rip and pull and tear, but it's *good*.

He offers the softest bits to Little-Him, but Little-Him leans into his side, sharp teeth bared in a wide, careless yawn.

When he finishes eating, he licks his face and fingers clean, buries the bloody pelt to hide the smell, and curls up around Little-Him in their little nest, falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

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It's nearly dark when they're awakened by a creaking and snapping, and slow, muffled thuds that grow louder as they approach. Little-Him presses hard against him, shivering, their safe, warm hollow flooded with the bitter reek of fear. He stays perfectly still, curled over Little-Him as best he can, barely daring to breathe as the thudding outside fades into a shuffle, then silence. Is the thing still out there? Is it waiting for them? Does it know they're there?

Something sighs, and as the wind shifts, he catches the scent of something familiar, something *good*.

The sheltering darkness. It's returned.

He gathers his courage first, shushing Little-Him and creeping cautiously into the open, claws sinking nervously into the mulch as he stays hunched on all fours. If he's wrong, he may have time to snatch Little-Him and run.

The thing that fills the clearing is massive, covered all over in a thick black pelt that goes fuzzy at the edges, like the wispy, white shapes in the sky. Even in the gloom, his eyes are keen, but it seems to him that the creature is both here and not here, both a thing and a *hole*. A twisted nest of antlers rise out of its skull, and he knows with wordless certainty that though he might fall into the creature's half-there bulk if he gets too close, the points of that tortured snarl will *always* be sharp.

The eyes that fix upon him are shockingly wrong, alien, *not his*. They're yellow where they should be white, with a weird dark streak drawn right through the middle, almost from corner to corner. He whines low in his throat, confused. It's the dark, their dark, the dark they came from--so why does it look so different?

It makes him feel wrong inside himself--if he's seen, he should match; safety lies in belonging--so when he feels the strange flutter in the pit of his stomach, he lets it grow and spread. His skin sprouts a layer of fur, nearly as soft and fine as what covered the little squirming things he gave to Little-Him. He twitches at the strangeness as his skull rearranges itself, trying to sprout the twin of the other's heavy crown. He blinks, and the colors of the world grow strange.

Hn, the creature grunts in quiet amusement, neither sound nor silence, though its voice sets the little nubs on the top of his head to buzzing. *Your father's child, indeed*.

What? he asks, though the meaning is abruptly *there*, like it's been hiding inside his skull all along. Father. The knowing-self that came before and helped spark his own.

Yellow eyes slide away as Little-Him crawls hesitantly out to join him, leaning into him with its face half-pressed into his side. A slow blink: the dark thing is surprised.

And the little one. Not eaten?

He growls at the thought, pulling Little-Him closer with one arm. *It's mine*.

The darkness snorts. ***She*** *is your sister, boy. And not likely to survive on her own. A wise child would be grateful for the meat*.

Even as he's growling louder, he's flooded with new knowledge. A sister. She. Different from him, but not. He's a spark; she could shelter her own small creatures someday.

He blinks up at incurious yellow eyes and knows.

You're our mother. He cocks his head with a frown. *How do I know this*?

Their mother's eyes gleam with new interest; he's done something strange again. *You know because you know. You* ***question*** *because of your father's influence, I suppose. My children*

rarely concern themselves much with whys.

He huddles thoughtfully in on himself as his skin slicks smooth again, the world's colors resuming their sharp edges. The shape of his skull remains the same.

Father, he echoes. *Children?* Small things, like him and his sister. *Will we meet them*?

Your father's a wanderer, their mother says with a shrug, shifting to curl her huge body up in a tighter ball. *You might see him someday. You might not. As for your siblings*, she says around a yawn, *best leave that until you're older. You won't like them much as you are*.

The sense of their mother's presence winks out in the next instant, and though he can still see her colossal bulk, his eyes try to convince him it's only a rock, a small hill shaggy with moss, at one with the earth beneath it. When his sister tries to creep closer to investigate, he pulls her back. Part of him wants to join her--wants to *rejoin* the hungry void that spat them out--but he doesn't think it will weave them together. He thinks he'd just be eaten, and he doesn't want to be eaten.

He's not sure their mother would notice, or if she did, that she'd care.

He glances down at his sister, who peers up at him trustingly from the shelter of his arms, and tries to see what their mother sees. He can't. His sister isn't meat.

If she won't survive on her own, he'll just have to keep her with him.

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It's as if there's a world inside his skull to match the world outside, knowable only in the instant he needs to *know*. Once he's got the trick of it, he only has to see a thing to comprehend its nature, but there's no satisfaction in it. He could melt seamlessly through life with no thought at all, concerning himself only with the source of his next meal, but he's plagued by a restlessness that can't be appeased by motion alone. It's not enough to know that this meat is prey and that one will hunt him if it can. If his mind could rumble like his belly, it would.

There's no one to tell him how strange he is in his discontent. They see their mother only rarely, and she doesn't concern herself much with them. His sister is as curious as he is, but she's contented with small things: a full belly, a warm place to sleep, shifting to mimic him as he tries on shape after shape. He's not good at many of them, his body stubbornly insisting on two arms, two legs. He can manage fur, but it's sparse, and he can't grow a tail at all.

His sister rolls in her lips and says nothing to his latest attempt at a fox, but her eyes are bright with laughter. He sighs.

I know, he says as red washes black, fur traded again for hairless skin. He doesn't understand. What good is being able to change his shape if he's so bad at it?

In the clearing at the foot of the tree they're perched in, the lone red fox he's been attempting to mimic sniffs the air suspiciously. It growls, but its meaning--*I bite*--is muddled, nothing at

all like when his sister speaks.

Food? his sister asks hopefully.

He rubs his cheek against the top of her head in agreement. Hunting is much easier than blending, and a fox is just small enough for him to manage on his own.

He drops out of the tree claws first, latching on tight as the fox yips and tries to squirm away. Whipping its head around, it snaps its jaws shut so close to his right eye he nearly loses his grip as he jerks his face aside. Fast as it is, he's faster; once he gets his teeth in, it's over quick.

Though his own stomach snarls at him, he doesn't dig in immediately. Straightening as he turns, he looks up to track his sister's progress as she clambers down after him. She's nimble, but still so small. He moves closer as her tiny claws begin to slip in a cloud of bark-dust, reaching his arms up for her to fall into.

The only reason he doesn't drop her at the stealthy crunch of leaves at his back is because his first instinct is always to pull her closer.

Falling back a step as he spins around, he stills in wide-eyed surprise. Black like him, with the same parts as him, the lean figure has their mother's amber eyes and a growing snarl of antlers, much larger than their own modest nubs. Well-muscled limbs are draped in a thick covering of fur, like their mother's but not: solid as an animal's pelt, with no whiff of the depthless dark hiding beneath the musk. Half again as tall as him, their sibling smells mostly of their mother, only a little of something new and strange. A different father, perhaps.

The freshly-killed fox dangles carelessly in their sibling's left hand.

He frowns at the theft. *That's not yours*. Hunger is a constant companion, but it's worse for his sister. He needs to eat to hunt for her, but no matter how much of his kills he saves for her, her bones still show through her thin brown skin. She needs that meat; their sibling is big enough, strong enough, to get his own.

You can have it, their sibling says, mouth stretching in a smile that shows off all his teeth. *I'll take that instead*.

A sharp chin jerks so there's no mistake. Those yellow eyes are fixed on his sister.

No, he says, arms pulling tight. *She's mine*.

Then you should've eaten her already.

He takes one step back, another, narrowly missing the tree trunk at his back. His sister freezes in his arms, the stark lines of her ribs stilled along with her breath as she shrinks against his chest, as if she could crawl inside him. If he could, he'd draw her in and keep her safe.

Tossing the fox carcass aside, their sibling stretches wide a grin full of promise.

He runs.

Birds startle from the branches overhead as he tears through the undergrowth, diving headlong into the brush and shunning the open paths. He's fast, but their sibling is faster. Their only hope lies in turning his smaller stature to their advantage.

Shifting his sister to rest on his hip in a one-armed grip, he uses his free hand to claw aside thin branches and vines, ignoring the green whips that slice open his skin. Mimicry is the last thing on his mind, but as desperation mounts, his bones turn fluid, twisting in and out of more agile shapes as need demands. The clamor of pounding footsteps and the crackle of splintering wood at their heels never falters, gaining on them breath by breath.

His sister shrieks in surprise when he lurches up onto two legs again and tugs her free of his neck, but she clamps arms and legs around him gamely when he swings her around to cling to his back. *Hold tight*, he tells her grimly, a reckless plan taking shape as he crests a hill, the trees ahead thinning to show glimpses of a solid wall of sunlight. *Tight as you can*.

She nods against the side of his neck as she buries her face there, tiny claws digging fresh welts he also ignores. Hands unburdened, he drops to all fours again and puts every ounce of strength into running, faster and faster, and doesn't hesitate when he bursts from the trees and over the crumbling edge of the earth that drops sheer and straight to a half-dry river below.

Eyes shut and buried, his sister tenses at their sudden weightlessness, the dizzying spin as he twists even as he falls. She gasps once, a hitch he feels through his spine, and is nearly ripped away from him when his scrabbling claws snag on the tangle of roots spilling over the cliff-edge, bringing them to a sudden stop. Dirt and dry fragments of leaves and grass shower down over their heads as his hands slip. Smooth and hard as stone, the roots he clutches at peel a layer of skin away his palms until his claws dig in deep enough to anchor them. He can hardly breathe as his sister hugs him tighter, but breathing is secondary to relief.

Falling past them with a growling, frustrated roar, their sibling flails for the same handholds and misses. Heavier, with more momentum behind his strides, he arcs wide and plummets straight down, struggling furiously to right himself.

They don't wait to see the outcome. Scrambling up to the top of the cliff, he sucks down desperate gulps of air and picks a direction at random, bolting as fast as his legs will carry them. They've stuck close to the place where the darkness first uncurled around them, but it's no longer safe here. They need a new place, somewhere they can hide.

It's all right, he promises as he runs, grateful he doesn't need breath to speak. His hands hurt too much to bend himself into another shape, and on two legs he feels frighteningly slow. *I won't let them take you*.

His sister says nothing, but she doesn't let go, trusting him to see them both through.

***

He soon realizes just how lucky they've been to have gone so long undiscovered. Away from that little pocket of safety, their siblings are everywhere, and they often hunt in packs. Their second escape is no less harrowing than the first; after that he learns to move with more caution, alert to every rustle of leaf and shift in the breeze.

Though they avoid their siblings when they can, they still catch glimpses of the others, and what they see is confusing. Even the ones that band together are apt to turn on one another at any moment. When they appear evenly matched, a truce may hold for a time, but let one take injury or come upon one larger or weaker than themselves, and it usually ends in a fight. He doesn't understand. None of them smell perfectly of each other, not like him and his sister, but they all smell like kin. Isn't that enough?

He wonders until they find their mother again, just after dawn, but while he wants desperately to go question her, something holds him back. An unfamiliar smell clings to her, or--no, she's wrapped *around* that scent, and as she shakes off her shadowy guise and lumbers to her feet, she leaves behind two small shapes curled together on the grass.

He stares at their two newest siblings, startled to see how small they are, how vulnerable. Nut-brown, they're covered with a short, fuzzy layer of cub fur, their heads already sporting the twin nubs of budding antlers. One sister is larger than the other, and that's the one who opens her eyes first. Lifting her head, she sniffs the air, pulls a little away from the smaller shape she's curled around, and stares with a puzzled frown.

He knows what's about to happen even before their sibling opens her mouth. He pulls his sister around to tuck her face into his stomach, even though it's far too late. She's just like him--of course she knows, even before the scream and the first wet, ripping tears--but she doesn't have to *see*.

He sees it all in her place, eyes open until the very end, as meat is stripped and small bones splinter. Their sister's spindly limbs and narrow torso lengthen, filling out before his eyes. Halfway through her meal, she snarls and shakes her head as if stung. The fur growing in plush all over her body mats down damply around her antlers as sharp shards of bone poke through the skin, branching upwards.

Her blood is black, and seeing it wakes a strange, weightless surge in the pit of his stomach. His own blood is red.

Different blood, different eyes, different scents. Different instincts. Maybe he's only mimicking his kin.

Maybe he doesn't belong anywhere, except with his sister.

They sneak away while their sibling is distracted, careful to leave no trace. If their sibling smells them, she'll hunt them, and now he knows why. To grow bigger. Stronger. Much, much faster than they can on their diet of squirrels and rabbits and foxes.

A wise child would be grateful for the meat.

His sister's hand is so tiny in his.

Would you be stronger if you ate me? she asks without looking at him, letting him help her over the caved-in hulk of a fallen tree.

No, he insists, and they both freeze, her hands on his shoulders, his hands on her waist to lift her down. For the first time, their strange, sourceless knowing is sharp-edged, the sheer wrongness of his reply hitting them both like a blow. He's never deliberately spoken a falsehood before, and they blink at each other solemnly as awareness settles over them. Awareness and something else: a horrible, gaping hole in the pit of his stomach as he contemplates what his life would be like after. He's never been singular, a thing with no answering half. Her comforting presence at his side is the only life he knows. *No*, he says again, chin firming stubbornly. *I would* not *be stronger. I'd just be alone*.

They take a moment to digest this new thing as well, the ghost of an alien loneliness sitting like a rock in their chests.

She curls up that night in the hollow he makes for her of his own wiry limbs, but while she drops off immediately, he stares blindly into the dark and wonders. Not about what her flesh would taste like. Not how it would feel to walk confidently amongst their kin, feared by all.

He wonders whether she'd grow tall and strong at last if he just fed her the right sort of meat.

***

As he grows more cunning, their siblings grow cruel. If they can't catch him, they'll settle for stealing his kills or startling his prey before he can pounce. There's little time to hunt as it is; he spends most of his days looking for safe places to catch a few hours of sleep. They eat his few paltry kills on the move, the short rations and broken sleep wearing on them both. As wary as he is, hunger is the one trap he can't escape.

His sister grows thinner by the day, her skin and brittle, staring bones rippling almost *too* quickly when she joins him in their now-rare games of mimicry. There's so little left of her, there's hardly anything to rearrange.

There comes a morning when he wakes hours later than he meant to and, panicked, nearly gives away their hiding spot in an old tree dense with empty crows' nests. He half expects to hear mocking laughter and the scrabble of claws on bark as their hunters clamber up in chase of them, but there's only birdsong, the creak of branches, the slow rhythm of his sister's breath.

They haven't slept past dawn for so long that it's become strange, but they've traveled far enough now that the forest itself feels unfamiliar. The trees here are younger, with thinner trunks, the canopy punched open to admit broad pools of sunlight. Maybe they've become too much trouble for their siblings to bother with. Maybe they've only left one danger behind for another.

Nudging his sister with his nose, he smiles at her sleepy grumble and waits for her to wake.

The woods they travel through that morning remain quiet, though at times they hear the far-off echo of strange sounds: the rhythmic strike of one hard thing against another, the clamor of a beast with a fox's bark, only deeper. Here and there in the distance he spots lakes of open grass where there are no trees at all and makes a conscious decision to avoid them. They'd be easy to spot there. Better to stick to the trees.

They see little in the way of prey as they walk, and nothing large enough to fill their aching bellies. He should be hunting as they go, but the drive to put as much distance between them and their siblings as possible is stronger.

When he sees the stag picking its careful way through the vine-choked brush, he thinks longingly of the feast it would be, his mouth flooding with hot saliva. It's a useless dream: it's favoring one foreleg, but it's many, many times larger than him, and he doesn't have the weight to bring it down. But if he could--

A sharp clap like a peal of thunder rings out, shocking every thought from his head. Muscles locked panic-tight, he watches the stag startle, its head jerking to the side rather than up. He expects it to flee the noise, but instead it topples to the ground in a graceless heap. He smells blood, brain, a mineral sharpness that stings his nose, and--

Something different. Something new.

A creature he's never seen before comes striding out of the trees on two legs, upright like their siblings but bare of fur, like them. Its skin is a pale pink like little mouse feet, mostly hidden by strange, thick coverings in muted forest tones. The fur on its head is long, so deep a brown it's almost black, its dark eyes fierce and focused. It carries a long, sturdy object in both hands--*weapon*, the knowledge trickles in, and oh, why did he never think beyond his own teeth and claws?--and steps almost lightly enough for stealth as it approaches the dead stag.

It doesn't seem to be aware of them at all, but he can't trust that it's not a trick. The creature is dangerous, kills in ways he doesn't yet understand. He doesn't care to cross it, but surely it can't eat *all that*. Maybe there will be enough left over for them.

He watches closely as the creature draws a thin, shining thing from its coverings and kneels beside the stag, pushing up its coverings to bare its forearms. The patterns scratched down the length of the shining thing pull at him, make him want to get closer, examine them properly. When it plunges deep into the body of the stag, something changes in the air: a scent, a sense of purpose, of possession. The stag's body is no longer only meat. It is *meant*. He has no idea what it is meant for.

The smell of blood grows stronger as the creature tears through hide to the soft insides. It seems to be looking for something in particular, but he can't guess what, distracted by the dizzying clench of his empty stomach. He stands his ground, mostly hidden behind the trunk of a tree, but hunger has made him sluggish. He isn't fast enough to stop her when his sister breaks, creeping from cover on trembling legs, one unwilling step after another. He can only follow her, looping an arm around her shoulders to gently still her in place.

The creature has the stag's heart in hand when it slowly turns its head to look at them, but it doesn't bare its teeth or growl to warn them off its kill. Maybe...maybe it won't care if they steal just a taste, so long as they're respectful. Maybe it has as little idea what to do with them as they do about it.

Something changes in the creature's eyes when they slide to fix on his sister, bright curiosity softening with an emotion he thinks he should recognize. The creasing of its forehead, the

tightness around eyes and mouth...the creature looks the way he feels when he lets himself think too long on how thin the arms that circle him have become.

It smiles at them then, and he has to wonder: do all things that go on two legs make that face? Their siblings do, but it's always a threat. When his sister smiles, it means happiness.

Then the creature open its mouth, spilling strange sounds.

"Hello, there."

He and his sister flinch back, startled though the creature's voice is soft. That...that was a greeting, as clear in meaning as their mother's voice.

"It's all right," the creature says with noise alone, the echo-place behind and above his eyes still and silent. "I'm not here to hurt you. Are you hungry?" it asks, holding the stag's heart out as if offering it to them.

Yes, he says without thinking, but the creature's face doesn't change, as if it hasn't heard him. That gives him pause--the beasts he hunts can't hear him either--but his sister's soft whine cuts through his indecision. If this is a trap, better he spring it than her.

He darts forward, snatching the still-warm hunk of meat from the creature's hand, retreating back to his sister before he can be grabbed or have his own belly slit open. He half expects the creature to give chase, steal the heart back when he gives it to his sister; he's heard plenty from his siblings on the folly of keeping such a weak thing alive.

The creature's hand curls slowly into a fist as it drops, its face doing something terrible that he knows from the inside out. It's angry, but not at them.

He cocks his head, his stomach doing a strange thing he doesn't yet understand, but it feels like tomorrow, and need, and possibilities. *Do you hear me at all*? he asks, the bright feeling below his ribs dimming when he gets no response.

The creature watches his sister eat for a moment with fierce satisfaction before tipping its eyes up to his. "You're a good brother," it says, voice softer than rabbit fur. "Would you like to come home with me? Both of you. You'd be safe there. And fed."

He can't have understood that correctly. The longer he stares, the more convinced he becomes that the creature is female, but it's doing the opposite of everything he knows. Females shelter a spark until it becomes a small thing. Maybe females like this one go looking for small things to shelter instead.

He glances despite himself at the body of the stag, surprised when the creature turns at once to cut out the liver and offer it to him. She may not be able to hear him, but she understands. Her...kindness?...may still be a trap, but he goes willingly, takes the food he's offered the way his sister would, with grace.

He edges back to join his sister again, but he doesn't miss being treated to that same satisfied look as the creature watches him eat. She *likes* seeing them fed, likes being the one to have

provided for them. Maybe, despite being a different thing entirely, she's just like him.

There's something in that thought that tugs on instincts half-buried under constant terror. It's not safe to be seen, but it's also not safe to be alone. They need food and shelter, and this female wants to give it. She wants to tear apart whoever took those things in the first place.

He licks his fingers clean as he weighs the dangers and glances down at his sister. *Do you want to see her den*? he asks, willing to take the chance. The creature could have killed them already if she'd wanted to. She fed them instead.

She said you were good, his sister replies contentedly, cleaning her own hands with messy, broad-tongued licks. *The others all say you're bad*.

That's enough to decide him, though he doesn't know what will happen when he tries. He's never once managed to become quite the shape he wants.

The change creeps like the prickle of insect feet over his skin as stealthy black is traded for tender pink. The tugging inside the orbs of his eyes is his only warning as the colors of the world shift to something warmer and dimmer. His skull aches as he tries to hide his budding antlers, and he's not sure whether he entirely managed it until he looks again to his sister.

Grinning, she reflects his failure back to him, giggling as he sighs. Still not perfect, but close, and it was *easy*, as if this is the form he's been meant to mimic all along.

The creature gasps, eyes wide with wonder when they look her way. Her lips part soundlessly when his sister tries to match the creature's long head fur and grows a short pelt of wispy curls.

"Do you have names?" she asks, strangely breathless.

He frowns helplessly at the question, understanding but not. She wants a way to summon them, to share the thing they know themselves by, but...he is himself. His sister is his sister. They've never needed anything else.

The creature seems to understand.

"Then you can be Mischa," she says with a hitch in her voice, eyes strangely bright. "If that's all right. And you," she says to him next, "you can be Hannibal."

She wears a look that reminds him of that odd flutter in his stomach, a look of possibilities and a longing for more.

Hope, he decides. That's hope.

As they leave the forest for the very first time, he lets their creature take his hand, trusts his sister's weight to her sheltering arms.

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When Will takes them over the edge of the cliff, Hannibal doesn't let go. He doesn't shift his skin or claw for handholds in the rock on the way down; they're too far away to do any good.

It doesn't matter.

When they hit the water, when Will goes limp in his arms, Hannibal holds on.

He can't conceive of the possibility that he would ever let go.

Chapter End Notes

Some things I am playing with here:

1. ~~Cousin Nigel~~ Nyarlathotep has never had much to do with ~~Shirley~~ Shub-Niggurath in the past, as he prefers mind games with the humans and she prefers tramping the wilderness and a minimum of bullshit. Hannibal and Mischa are their only children together, so Hannibal's bizarre insistence on not eating his weaker sibling was kind of a surprise.

2. Nyarlathotep's kids are all about blending in and subtle machinations, so they're more likely to form alliances, especially when they're young. Shub-Niggurath's kids are more survival of the fittest: you put life in your belly and you live. Hannibal is what happens when you put the mind of a master manipulator in the body of a killing machine.

3. I tried not to write Shub-Niggurath as Shirley in this one, but ugh, I couldn't help myself. I *can* help writing crossovers I totally do not need to write, though. Maybe.

Meant

Chapter Summary

Fathers and daughters.

Garret grows up a stone's throw from the woods, right on the edge of town. The house is too big for just the four of them, but they make do. A lot of the rooms just stay closed up, but his sister likes to dig through the old clothes and things left behind, even though she knows she'll get a whuppin' if she leaves a mess. Sometimes she tries to get him to play dress-up too, but his uncle's mothballed uniform doesn't come close to fitting him, not like the scads of dresses his sister's got to pick from fit her.

Aunt Claudia's clothes are ugly but cheerful, so colorful an ice cream shop must've thrown up on them, and her pants legs are dumb, like someone forgot they were making jeans and tried to make a skirt instead. Great-Aunt Rose's are prettier, but much, much plainer, though he's not sure what to make of the dog skirt. Grauntie Brenda's dresses are both the nicest and the strangest, with fringes and sequins and glass jewels and feathers. The material is stiff with age, leaves their hands feeling greasy, though there's nothing left behind that they can see.

"Are you two playing in those back rooms again?" their mom will yell down the hall if they've been quiet too long. Garret's always grateful, even if it means a mad scramble to get clear before she can snap their butts with a dishrag. He'd rather be outside, down at the creek or lying in wait for lizards by the woodpile, pretty much anywhere but here.

"Why does she keep all that stuff if she doesn't want us playing with it?" his sister grumbles every time. It's a dumb question. Uncle-Davey-who-died-of-the-drink (rest his soul) was their mom's kin.

The girls came with the house.

***

When Garret is five, his dad gives him his first gun. It's not a really-real rifle, just a BB gun, but he carries it with him everywhere. Mom doesn't like that--"Gods' sakes, George, can't you at least keep hold of the shot?"--but she's not really arguing, just complaining.

"Don't worry 'bout your Ma. Hunting's in her blood too," his dad says in a rumbling undertone, leaning in over the breakfast table as pots and pans clatter in the kitchen. His sister keeps her eyes on her plate. She never asks to go when their dad fetches out his coat and rifle, even though she's way past old enough. Garret's as confused as he is jealous.

With dire predictions of what it'll get him if he shoots out a window from his mom and a steady supply of pellets from his dad, Garret practices until he can plug a line of cans as neat as you please, or fill up a bullseye if someone's feeling fancy. When his dad's friends come over to drink, they like to sit out on the back porch to watch, whooping encouragement with every pull.

"Gonna be a deadeye like your dad, huh, sport?" Sheriff Goodnight says with a grin, the base of his beer can drawing wet circles where it rests on his knee.

"Yes, sir," Garret says, puffing his chest out proudly.

"Yep. You're a Hobbs boy, all right. Blessed, all'a ya."

Garret doesn't know about that. They kneel at the right moons and set out the right offerings, but he's never seen what happens to the carcasses they leave or what might've come to take them. His sister says that means they're doing it right.

No one's ever said anything about any kind of blessing, though.

***

Soon it's not just tin cans; it's rabbits and squirrels, and Garret's dad shows him patiently how to skin and gut his kills. 'Dressing,' he calls it, but it's nothing like the games his big sister still wants to play.

("Aren't you too old for this?" their mother scolds, hands on her hips.

"Never," his sister says with a cheeky grin, twirling in Grauntie Brenda's shiniest dress. It almost fits her perfectly.)

Garret doesn't mind the messy parts, except for where they lead.

"Squirrel again?" he dares to mumble, picking at his dinner. He's sure other kids get pizza and hamburgers every night.

"If you don't want it," his mom says tartly, "stop bringing it home. In this house, what you hunt, you eat."

"Your Ma's right," his dad agrees before Garret can protest. "You take a life, you better put it to good use. 'Sides, there's a lot of hungry creatures in this world. Ain't right to take food out of their mouths if you're not gonna eat it yourself."

He's more careful after that, brings home only what they need. His sister makes a face when she's presented with a plate of beef liver and onions, but Garret digs in without complaint. It's something *new*.

And anyway, it's all meat in the end.

***

The first time his dad takes him hunting for real, it's magic. His dad has never come back empty-handed from the woods, so Garret's always guessed in a dim sort of way that he must be good at it. Watching the way his dad moves through the trees, every step silent and sure, makes him think the sheriff may have been right.

Garret's concentrating so hard on his own feet, trying to be a fraction as quiet as his dad, that he doesn't see the deer at all until his dad stops him. It's a doe, both enormous and somehow smaller than he'd expected. Her nostrils flare as she steps with ginger care past a tangle of brush, but the early fall wind buffets their faces, not their backs. Garret fumbles on instinct to bring his rifle up, but his dad pushes the barrel back down with a tiny headshake.

"She's got a fawn with her," his dad murmurs almost too quietly to hear. "See?"

Sure enough, a baby trots out a moment later, kicking up its heels as a bug zips by its ear. It still has its spots, but it's nimble and brave, snuffling curiously at everything it sees.

"We don't hunt the mothers," his dad adds quietly, smiling a little at the pair. "They're special."

They come back with meat for the table anyway: a pair of boring old rabbits, but his dad doesn't seem to mind. Garret guesses he wouldn't. He could've bagged that doe if he'd wanted to; could've just walked right up and touched her, his dad's that quiet. He's like a *ghost*. The whole forest is his for the taking, and Garret burns in mingled pride and determination. He's going to have that kind of skill one day. He's going to walk the forest like he owns it, like he's one with it, just like his dad.

"How'd you get so good?" Garret asks as they start back home. There's got to be some trick he can learn, some knack he can study.

"Well, uh...." His dad ducks his head, rubbing at the tip of his nose. His eyes are fixed on the ground ahead, distant and unblinking. "I guess you could say it's a gift."

***

In the winter his sister starts looking at colleges. She wants to go into fashion design, or maybe do costuming for some big theater company. It kind of makes sense, except Garret's seen her drawings, and they're terrible. Their mom fusses, asks which colleges she's looking at, if she's sure she wants to move that far, and are any of her friends looking at the same cities?

Never much for talking, their dad goes all but mute, moping around the house with a face as long as a week of Sundays. No amount of hugs or cajoling smiles can cheer him out of it. Mom tries to talk him around, but it goes about as well as you'd expect.

"It's not too late," Mom says late one night, so quiet Garret wouldn't have heard her if he hadn't been tiptoeing past their bedroom on the way to the bathroom. "She might...settle if we found something close."

Dad sighs. "That might work for a little while, 'least if she stays put, but she won't. You know she won't. That girl wasn't ever gonna be the one who stayed."

He's never heard his dad sound so tired, and it wakes a squirmy feeling of panic in his stomach. He creeps past their door in a hurry, breath held, so careful not even the ancient floorboards creak under his weight. He's a ghost, just like his dad.

He wants to beg his sister to change her plans, but he knows it won't do any good. All her life she's been racing to grow up and leave another room full of memories for someone else to find. It's far too late to talk her out of it now.

***

On the last moonless night of the year, they light their candles and walk out into the trees, Dad in the lead, Mom bringing up the rear. Garret winces each time a branch snaps under his sister's careless feet, but it's like she can't even hear herself. Her head's a million miles away, her body going through the motions. Maybe that's all she's ever done.

The big rock where they leave their offerings wears a thin veil of snow, the ground beneath a mire of wet mulch. The battered chalice that sometimes sits atop the low boulder has fallen off again, so Dad fishes it out of the leaves and wipes it clean with the tail of his shirt. Mom holds his candle as he fills the cup from his hip flask, all the way to the brim.

Dad's the man of the house, and mothers are sacred, but Garret's sister is their firstborn. The chalice goes to her, and she takes it with a grin Garret doesn't like. They're both too young for wine, but it's not like it actually tastes good, so why is she smirking like she's getting away with something?

She drinks deep, but Dad doesn't tell her to knock it off this time, and Mom doesn't clear her throat or arch a brow. Dad just eases behind her while she's got the chalice tipped back, his mouth a grave line as he reaches around her shoulder, candlelight running like sun-chased water down the edge of his hunting knife.

Garret's eyes widen slowly as his sister gasps, chokes, and drops the chalice into the leaves at her feet. It spills everywhere, but it's hard to tell which of the dark patches soaking into the leaves are wine or blood. Dad doesn't let go, right arm wrapping firmly around her chest while his free hand covers her eyes, tipping her head back to rest on his shoulder. Cheek-to-cheek, he holds her until her clawing hands drop to her sides and presses a kiss to the crown of her head.

Lightheaded, breath hitching too fast in his chest, Garret flinches when his mom pulls him close against her hip. Dad doesn't look at him, lifting the limp body in his arms to drape across the altar rock, and--

Oh. They hadn't brought any meat with them. Somehow he's only just noticed.

"For you, Mother," Dad murmurs, smoothing stray wisps of dark hair away from a shocked, pale face. "We won't forget what we owe."

Questions boil inside Garret's head, but they remain locked behind his teeth even as his mother turns him bodily around, clicking her tongue in annoyance at his noisy stumble. He doesn't understand. Why are rabbits and deer suddenly not enough? Haven't they been doing everything right? He doesn't understand any of this. But his parents are leaving--leaving his sister behind--and he totters blindly in step, too numb to even look back for a final glimpse.

They haven't gone very far, only just out of sight of the clearing, when Garret flinches again, hitching his shoulders up around his ears as formless dread crawls down his spine. His parents move as one to blow out their own candles, his father reaching over to pinch out the wick of Garret's in the same breath. Darkness closes in on them like the jaws of a trap, and in the breathless silence that follows, Garret can just make out the hiss of leaves displaced, the stealthy approach of something--*somethings*--through the trees.

He squints his eyes shut tight, heart rabbiting in his chest, waiting for the bite of claws and teeth. There's a laugh at his back instead--back at the clearing where they'd left his sister--and it's answered by a pleased growl. Neither voice sounds human. None of the sounds that follow do either.

The shredding of cloth. The slick rip of meat tearing. The splintering of bone.

His mother's fingers dig into his cheeks as she covers his mouth. He hadn't even realized he'd opened it.

Taking his free hand, his dad crouches before him, his grip patient and fearless. Garret blinks and finds he can *see*, just a little. Just enough.

Dad puts a finger to his lips, and Garret nods as best he can.

When he straightens, his dad doesn't let go, tugging Garret to follow as he leads them out of the woods again, picking his way past rocks and deadfalls as if he's got a personal spotlight shining on the path. His mom keeps one hand on Garret's shoulder, nudging him now and then when he threatens to drift off course. None of them speak. Garret doesn't think he's the only one listening, holding his breath in case he misses the rustle of footsteps creeping up behind them.

The house is still lit up when they return, just the way they left it, but nothing's ever going to be the same again.

He goes to his room without arguing when his dad leads him back there, the two of them sitting side-by-side at the edge of the bed for a long moment. When his dad hesitantly loops an arm around his shoulders, Garret leans into his side with a sob.

"Why?" he asks, voice mostly breath. He's terrified the things back in the clearing will hear him speak of them and *know*. "Why did...why was she...?"

His dad sighs. Though his eyes are red, his face is composed. "The Great Mother...She's been good to our family. We've made it through war, famine and drought on the strength of Her gifts, and when someone gives you something...well, it's only right that you give something back.

"Your sister was paid a great honor, son. The Mother has a thousand mouths to feed, and She does all right, you know, but sometimes...sometimes we can lighten Her load. Never more than once in a generation. First fruits, if they can be spared. She's not *cruel* with it," his dad insists with a hitch in his voice. "Only the ones who aren't right by Her. We let them grow, live their lives, and when they're old enough, we make it quick. They're marked, you see, and it's not just the Mother's children who can sense it. At least this way...it's almost like we're keeping a part of her, through the Mother's gifts."

Garret nods, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. "How do I know if someone isn't right? By the Mother?" Maybe he shouldn't have gone along with all those games of dress-up. If they'd spent more time together in the woods, would things have gone differently?

"You'll know," his dad says heavily, old regret thickening his voice. "The first time you hold them, you'll know. But you understand, don't you? About giving back?"

"Yessir," Garret says, but then he can't hold his tongue. "It's just not fair. Why did *she* have to be marked? Couldn't--couldn't we have found--"

"Oh, honey." He sounds like Garret's breaking his heart. "It's not that simple. I could've offered sacrifice every month in her place for the rest of her life, but only if she stayed put to let us hide her." He shakes his head, shoulders sagging, defeated. "She'd have hated that, and you know it. Besides...promised is promised. She was never ours to keep."

***

They call Sheriff Goodnight in the morning. Garret expects trouble, for a lot of pointed questions to be asked, but when he finally comes around late in the afternoon, the sheriff just looks tired.

"Yeah, it's a bad one, this year," the sheriff says, accepting a mug of coffee and a seat at the kitchen table. "You're my third missing persons, and--uh...well, you'll read about it in the paper soon enough."

He asks a few more questions, but Garret doesn't think he really expects to find anything. He's not sure the sheriff even intends to look.

"Small towns," his mother says with a rueful headshake, watching the cruiser roll away.

"Small mercies," his dad counters, and that's the last Garret ever hears about the matter.

***

He's away at college when it happens. The Great Mother's gifts may protect them from ambush and discovery, might keep food in their bellies while the rest of the world starves, but they can't keep a drunk driver in his lane. When the call comes, they tell him his parents died instantly. Maybe that's karma: at least it was quick.

He only plans to take a few weeks off, but there's just so much to do. The house is his now, but the first time he walks past his sister's closed door, he knows he doesn't want it. He

understands now that these rooms are monuments to the ones who paid in blood what they couldn't pay in devotion, but he wants a family of his own someday, can't bear the thought of any child of his playing amongst these ghosts.

He packs everything up, drops most of it off to be donated and drives the rest to the dump. The house goes up for sale as-is; his dad was always good about keeping up with repairs.

The next moonless night is still a week away when he treks out to the clearing in the woods. In the bright light of day, the altar rock looks smaller than he remembers, though it's still big enough to lay a carcass out on neatly. It always surprises him how clean it looks when not in use, but the rain and sun have done their jobs, washing away all evidence that this has ever been a place of worship.

There aren't even any bones left. Whoever's been honoring their sacrifices, they haven't wasted a single part.

***

He doesn't go back to college. He finds a trade school, picks up a few courses in welding on a whim and joins the pipefitters union two years later. It's not the white collar work his mom had hoped he'd be drawn to, but Minnesota is a fresh start in more ways than one.

He meets Louise on his first jobsite when he goes in to fill out his new-hire forms. She's funny and smart, and there's a stillness about her he likes, patient and sure. He can't ask her out, not with her in HR, but that just gives them time to make certain of each other, to ask without asking the questions that need answering most.

It takes a year, but when the project runs out, he finds a different job, finds a nice house in a good neighborhood at the edge of the trees, and tries not to fidget too nervously when he shows her the place. Louise just laughs. Yes, of course she loves it, of course it's perfect for raising a family, and of course she'll marry him.

Their friends think they're crazy for rushing things, but they've known they'd suit each other from the moment they met. It's nothing his dad ever thought to mention, but like calls to like, and hunting's in their blood.

***

Maybe it's disloyal of him. Maybe that disloyalty, that little sliver of selfishness, is what makes it take so long in the first place. He knows Louise expects to start their family immediately, but a year passes, then a few more. It's not that they're not trying--and no sir, he is not complaining about how often they try--but it's just not happening.

And then one day Louise comes out of the bathroom with a huge grin and a little stick she brandishes like a sword, and Garret learns what fear really tastes like.

Lying in bed that night, with Louise curled into his side, her head pillowed on his shoulder, he finds himself thinking of loopholes and contingencies, his mind racing too fast to let him

sleep. Their child is barely a possibility, but already all he can think about is everything he stands to lose.

"You're thinking awfully loud," Louise murmurs sleepily, splaying her fingers across his chest.

"Sorry, hon," he says, turning his head to press his lips into her hair, the better to stop his questions before he can speak. Louise is a good girl, soon to be a mother herself. He doesn't want to disappoint her, but-- "It was always the firstborn. In my family."

Picking up her head, Louise studies him for a long moment, seeing him clearly even in the dark. "Is that...important to you? To keep that tradition?"

They've never talked specifics. They make their sacrifices and say their prayers, and he's never really taken the time to consider how lucky they are in their similarities, but in that moment he feels like a condemned man given a last-minute reprieve.

"No, it--no. Just...how did your folks do it?"

"Only the ones that don't have the Mother's spark," Louise explains, voice as hushed as his had been many years ago, as if something might be drawn to the mention of it, even in the most hazy of terms. "Sometimes it skipped a generation. Sometimes there'd be more than one. Good husbandry, my gram called it," she adds with a rueful twist of her mouth. "Mom always hated that."

Garret doesn't blame her. They're faithful, not domesticated. "Then we might...."

"We might keep this one," Louise finishes for him, voice soft and fond. "And the next." And then she laughs. "You're really looking forward to being a dad, aren't you?"

"Be nice to have a full house again," he hedges, sensing danger in that line of talk.

Louise grins. "Then you picked the right Mother to worship, didn't you?"

***

They go for the hospital delivery because it'd look weird otherwise, but Garret's on pins and needles the entire time. He keeps waiting for something to go wrong, for complications to arise or for Child Services to storm in and tell him they *know*, and he's not sure he wouldn't fling the kid right into their arms if they did.

It all goes off without a hitch, and as the nurses congratulate her on a surprisingly easy labor for a first-time mother, they place his daughter in Louise's arms.

She's a red-faced little thing, features squashed like she's screwing her face up in disgust at this strange new environment, and Garret falls in love, just like that. Tiny as she is, her arms and legs flail strongly as Louise draws a glyph on her forehead with the pad of her thumb, but she doesn't cry. He's never been present at a dedication before, but he can feel the change in the air as their little girl becomes a child of the Great Mother, the sensation so subtle he'd never have noticed if he hadn't recognized that kinship in someone new once before. She

feels like Louise does now, the way he must to others that share their faith. And if he can sense it--

Louise kisses Abigail's wispy hair, but her eyes are serious when they find his. In that instant, without ever having held her, Garret knows. His little Abigail isn't really his, promised away before he had any say in the matter. He could have argued. Could have taken Abigail and run.

Louise has always been too smart for the likes of him.

***

He tries not to get attached, but that's over from the moment Abigail learns to crawl. Noisier and more clumsy than he ever remembers being, she refuses to stay put, and wherever he is is the one place she wants to be. She's a happy kid, always babbling excitedly about something, but she'll start to fuss if he's been out of sight too long.

Louise shakes her head over him when he insists on carrying Abigail to the worship site, even after she's old enough to walk. What else is he supposed to do? She's not quiet enough on her own, and he can't risk anything hearing her and coming to investigate. He's going to lose her, he knows that, but not just yet. Not when he can help it.

He spends a lot of time tramping the woods, leaves a lot of sacrifices on the altar. He knows it's stupid whenever he looks at the thought directly, but some part of him hopes that if he keeps the Mother's brood full and happy, maybe She'll decide he's done enough.

He's not sure why he's surprised, but when a small hand latches onto his coat one Saturday and stops him at the door, he expects to be asked to stay. Instead Abigail fixes him with those big blue eyes, puts on her most trustworthy expression, and asks, "Daddy? Can I go with you?"

All his words desert him, but the kneejerk refusal he wants to voice stays trapped behind his teeth. She's the same age he was when his dad first let him tag along, and she's got her mom's smarts and level head. Why shouldn't she come with him? Normal families--normal people--go hunting all the time.

And maybe with enough practice, enough opportunity, maybe she'll discover the wild thing inside her lying dormant. He at least has to try.

***

Louise doesn't say one word about how he's fooling himself, and she never once gives Abigail any reason to think she's less than the best hunter she can be. She's a good mom, even if Garret still hasn't entirely forgiven her for taking the hardest task on herself. It's not even a lie; any normal father would have every reason to brag. If his girl finds a trail, she can track it, however cold, can shave the whiskers off a field mouse with her shooting. She's a natural, and Garret--he doesn't understand. How can Abigail be so quick to pick up everything he teaches her and still not have the Mother's spark?

He's hurting Louise with his obsession and he knows it, but this isn't how he wanted things to go.

Abigail's seventeenth birthday flies past, and day by day, Garret feels an icy fist start to close around his throat. He can't feel them yet, not clearly, but *something* has started to circle at the edge of his notice, slinking closer with every rising of the moon. Though the year's only just begun, December looms large in his thoughts. One more year--less than that--and it'll all be over.

Unless.

She might settle, he recalls his mother saying, *if we found something close*.

He'd thought at the time she meant his sister. He knows better now.

***

The first time is almost an accident. Abigail had wanted to visit a nearby college, so close she could have driven home for the weekends, and of course he hadn't said no. If there's one thing he does agree with, it's keeping his damn mouth shut about what's coming. He doesn't want her scared, can't stand the thought of her living in dread. He doesn't even consider that he might not be half the actor he thinks he is until they run into a girl who could be Abigail's twin in the campus parking lot and he's struck dumb by the possibilities.

Abigail takes one look at him, and before he can pull himself back together, she pastes on a bright grin and fakes a gasp. "Oh, wow--I've heard everybody has a twin, but--you're not from Litchfield, are you?"

"No? Um...wow," the other girl echoes, distracted from his odd response by Abigail's quick thinking. "You know, you're right?" She grins suddenly with a spark of mischief, every trick every pair of twins has ever played dancing in her eyes. They're brown, not a perfect match, but...maybe they're close enough. "Are you enrolled here?"

"Not yet," Abigail says with a sly look of her own, leaning fractionally closer. "I'm here for the tour, though. Maybe you can tell me what it's like?"

He's torn between pride and despair, because his girl is brilliant, but this isn't anything he's ever coached her on, and he has no idea where it's coming from. He'd think she was just smoothing over his awkwardness--she's good at that--but he can hear where her questions are leading, even if the other girl can't.

So where are you from? Is that close enough you can go home a lot? Oh, this weekend? Lucky.

It really is. There's still a sliver of moon tonight, but tomorrow...?

He can't do this on a full moon. He doesn't want Louise to try to talk him out of it. But tomorrow will be just fine.

The drive back is quiet. He wants to ask how much she knows, wants to swear he'll *fix* this, but he's scared to open that can of worms. Even if she's wrong, whatever sort of monster she thinks he is, it can't be worse than the truth.

The stars are just coming out as they pull in at the house, yellow light from the windows spilling out warm and welcoming. The car engine ticks quietly as it cools, but neither of them move to get out. Hands still curled around the wheel, Garret clears his throat, but the only words that emerge are, "I love you, honey."

Abigail's smile is sad but kind. "I know, Dad," she says, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "I love you, too."

He has to fix this. He has to. Whatever it takes.

***

It's almost too easy to track his target with all the work Abigail did in setting up the blind. He's so proud of her, it's a tender ache behind his ribs. Any fool can snare a rabbit, but his girl could be so much *better*. He almost asks if she wants to accompany him on this hunt as well, but there can't be any confusion as to which girl he means to honor. He needs Abigail to stay far, far away from this, where she's safe.

Louise squeezes his hand hard before he leaves, pulls him down to press a fierce kiss to his brow: a mother's blessing. She might not approve of his hesitance, but she loves their daughter too.

Everything goes according to plan, almost like it's meant to happen. He catches the girl on her way home from the movies--on foot, because her parents' house is close enough for her to walk--and he's as gentle as he can be when he knocks her out. He feels bad about loading her into the trunk after trussing her up, but it's a fair drive back, and he doesn't want the meat to spoil. She's already doing him a favor he can never repay; he'll never forgive himself if it's all for nothing.

A nice, flat rock had always been altar enough for Garret's family, but Louise's kin did things a bit differently. There wasn't one rock but a tumble of heavy stones heaped waist-high, a stag's skull braced amongst the boulders. Mostly they left their offerings cradled in the tines of its rack, but for larger sacrifices, a bit more strength of arm is required.

It seems a little sacrilegious to just drive to their worship site, but it's better than being seen. Knowing the Old Ones are there is one thing, but most people just try to keep their heads down, avoid notice, and even the devout would give him hell for what he's doing. Promised is promised, and you live up to your word; you don't take your messes out on other families who may have gods of their own. You don't give *more*, out of the appointed time and season, unless you're up to no good.

He takes the back roads, lifts an old cattle gate off its hinges instead of fiddling with the rusted lock and chain, and takes a pitted dirt track as close as he can get to the altar. It's pretty damn close, and when he shuts the engine off, he leaves the headlights on, lighting up the

clearing just past the final trees. Even without a moon, he doesn't need any light to see, but if she's awake, the girl might. She might appreciate one last look, not going out in the dark.

Another small light clicks on when he pops the trunk, illuminating terrified eyes, a pale face streaked with tears. It's the moment of truth, in a way. He knows Louise has wondered, because he wonders too: is he a father who loves his child too much, or is he just a coward, too squeamish for what they do?

Looking at the girl--shaking, pleading with him in muffled gasps from behind a gag--he feels nothing but gratitude.

"I'm sorry," he says, ignoring the fresh tears that overflow at his words. "It's nothing you did. I just need you to intercede for my little girl." She shakes her head frantically in denial, but he ignores that too. No deer ever went willingly to the table; it won't change the quality of the meat. "Thank you."

She doesn't need to see the altar or the antlers, to see what's coming next. He's not going to be *cruel* about it. He puts his hands to her throat, and it's just...easy. A little pressure, a little patience, and it's done.

Mounting the body on the sharp tines, he cuts the cords binding wrists and ankles, unfolding her arms to stretch wide in supplication. Before sketching the glyph of dedication on the girl's brow with his thumb, he checks again for a pulse. He's had night terrors of dedicating his sacrifice only to have it found worthy of life where his own daughter was not. He wants to avoid that possibility at all costs.

When he's done, he waits, but there's no sign from the heavens, no movement from the trees. He tries to shout his intentions, but his voice checks and chokes. "For Abigail," emerges in a whisper as the back of his neck begins to tingle.

He doesn't hurry as he gathers the cut ropes and closes the trunk, climbing behind the wheel. If the Mother decides it's time to call him home, there's nothing he can do about it anyway. Nothing tries to stop him as he leaves; maybe by now Her children have learned to recognize him as a source of devotion.

He just hopes they understand the trade he's trying to make, a life for a life.

He greets Louise with a nod when he returns, and she welcomes him back with relief, but Abigail won't meet his eyes, staring thoughtfully into the distance. He tries not to let it hurt.

"Did you tell her?" he asks Louise that night, but she shakes her head.

Abigail's a smart girl. She'll figure it out, enough to understand. She has to.

He's doing this for her.

***

He goes back in the morning, just to make sure, but things are different this time. He can tell the sacrifice was accepted, but gods, they've left a mess. Part of it is because he just didn't

think, and it occurs to him belatedly that his parents must have returned for his sister's shoes, the rags of her clothes. He just can't tell what he's supposed to make of the pieces arranged like decorations on the sharpened antler points: a spill of dark hair still attached to the scalp, the greyish-pink sponge of a lung, a strip of muscle that might have come from a thigh. Is he just supposed to leave them there? Or is this some strange form of politeness, a show of generosity?

You shared with us. We'll share with you.

Shaking out two black plastic bags, he puts the clothes in one along with the splinters of bone he gathers up, then hesitates over the rest. He could be disturbing something he knows nothing about, but...someone should honor that girl for what she's done for his family. They should honor every part.

***

For an entire week, he lets himself hope that maybe what he's done is enough, but then the feeling comes back, stronger than before. There's something circling out there, waiting for the chance to strike and take what's owed. *Every month*, his father had said, and Garret fights it for a little while, now that Abigail's looking at him again. He fights, but if that's what it's going to come down to, so be it.

Abigail's subdued the second time, at least until they spot their prey, and it's like a switch gets thrown. She's shy at first, but soon the two girls are giggling together in a campus café, a party-girl flightiness slowly emerging in Abigail's manner as Garret fakes good-natured resignation. In no time at all, he has what he needs: an upcoming wedding, a three-day trip, a little silver Camry that needs some engine work.

He doesn't wait until quite so late in the morning to go back that time. That first gift of meat had still been good, but the days aren't getting any cooler. It's the same mess as before--shoes and jeans and a drenched cotton shirt, because he'd been too uncomfortable with the idea of undressing that girl to spare any of them the trouble--bones and a tithe of flesh, and a neatly-hung wig stiff with blood. He cleans it all up without complaint, still not certain if doing that is *right*, but secure at least in knowing he has another month to wonder on it.

***

Abigail doesn't ask. She's mousy and quiet with the next one, who takes her under her wing with sisterly concern, bold and confident with the one after that. An asset. A bookworm. Anything they need her to be.

In the summer before her senior year, she starts making his lunch, bringing it to him on the job now that she's got her license. The other guys ride him a little, jealous that his teenager even wants to be seen within five miles of her old man, but he stares at that first insulated bag with a throat gone painfully tight.

He doesn't need the perfect daughter. He doesn't need anything but for her to stay alive.

***

It's not until the eighth that he messes up. He goes out the next morning with his two thick trash bags, and his heart just about stops. She's still there, almost exactly the way he left her, except her belly's been sliced open and someone's been rummaging around inside.

There's something resting on her stomach--her liver, from the looks of it--but he's pretty sure it's not supposed to look quite like that.

Panic sings down his spine, spreading through his limbs as it sets his nerves alight, but worse than that is the guilt. He did this. He *wasted* this, for nothing. The thought teases him briefly that he could just...make the best of it, make use of what he can, but his own cowardice sickens him. He can't disrespect her like that. He'd meant to *honor* her, and if he can't, then he should let her family do it in his place.

"Gods," he breathes in defeat. It's going to be such a nightmare taking her back where she belongs, but at least the Mother's blessing will see him through.

He's less certain where he's going to find another proxy, and the Mother's children will be waiting. Hungry.

***

He knows something's up when he walks into the family room just a couple of evenings later to find Louise and Abigail staring at the television with different degrees of consternation. Louise's frown is a little judgmental, mouth pursed in a disapproving line, but Abigail stares with the queasy fascination of someone studying an accident they narrowly avoided.

The news story is another one about the missing girls, only...he's never even seen that field before, and who the hell is the Minnesota Shrike?

His brows shoot up as a grainy photograph flashes on the screen: a sacrifice arranged for the taking, right out in the open where any outsider or hungry beast could come stumbling across it. He almost feels like he's being mocked, but they do things differently here. What does he know?

"Do you have any kin in Hibbing?" he asks carefully. He's trying to be respectful, but--

"None that crass," Louise huffs. "Or stupid."

He nods to placate her, but he's not so sure about the stupid. The reporter's going on about an intelligent psychopath in that way people have when they just like the sound of a thing. It sounds big and impressive, but she doesn't really get what it means.

Garret does. He took a few classes way back, hoping to gain some kind of understanding, and he still remembers what he read. There wouldn't have been any feeling behind that sacrifice, no worship to make it a proper offering. It's nothing more or less than what it is: a shocking picture someone staged to send a message, and he's pretty sure the intended recipient is him.

As to what it says...he doesn't know. But he can guess.

If it's one of *them*--a fast, strong hunter arrogantly certain of not getting caught--then it's a warning. *We can get our own meat*.

They're telling him, *Hurry up*.

***

"This weekend?" Louise asks as they move around the kitchen in tandem, her working at the stove, him in charge of pancakes on the counter grill. She's been taking more time off this last year, and Garret appreciates these family breakfasts more than he can say. "Again? Already?"

He doesn't want to say too much in front of Abigail, but just then the phone rings, and Abigail goes to answer it. "If someone else has got the same idea...."

"Yes, I *know*, but--"

"Dad?" Abigail interrupts, frowning at the phone as she holds it out. "It's for you."

He hopes he isn't being called in on a new job. Probably it's a telemarketer, and he can just hang up and get on with his day.

"*Mr. Garret Jacob Hobbs*?"

He's so bemused by being *full named* over the phone by a voice so official that he barely listens to the next few words, wondering if he's somehow run afoul of the government.

"*Are you listening*?"

"Yes." Yeah, he's definitely listening, his attention well and truly snared, but--

"*They know*."

The man on the other end hangs up before Garret can recover enough to demand who--*who* knows, and *what* do they know, and who is this stranger to tell him anything? His first thought is for the hungry ones, but that doesn't make any sense. It's not like one of them would call him on the phone; that's a human thing. But that just means this is a human thing too, and the only thing they could know--

"Honey?" Louise asks, eying him strangely as the blood drains from his face. "Who was that?"

"Wrong number," he says, though he doesn't believe it. It couldn't have been the cops, though, because they wouldn't have warned him. They'd have just...taken him in, stopped him from ever finding another proxy, leaving his daughter to fend for herself.

Gods.

Because that's how it's going to go, isn't it? Louise loves Abigail, but she won't fight for her, not like Garret will. With him out of the picture, it's only a matter of time before something finds her, or before Louise leads her out to the altar and does the job herself. As hard as he's

fought to keep her safe, this isn't how he'd ever thought it would end, but what can he do? He could run, but he can't leave her here, and he doesn't know if Louise would let him betray both their families and take her. Or he could....

He could turn himself in. Wait for the cops to show up and hope none of them are consecrated themselves, that they'll be brave enough to want to save a sacrifice instead of washing their hands of the whole thing. There are *hotlines* for this, but he's never trusted them enough to be anything but traps until now, when he has no other choice.

He grimaces back when Abigail gives him a worried smile, but he knows now what he has to do.

Louise watches him like a hawk as they sit down to eat, but he's got nothing to say. It's all going to be over in just a little while; he just has to keep his mouth shut and wait. They might even let Abigail see him after, or at least write to him. As long as she's okay--

He drops a plate back into the dishwater as he's cleaning up, his head snapping up with a jerk.

There's.

Something.

Coming.

"Garret," Louise says flatly as the feeling hits her too. "What's going on?" It's not a question.

At the table, Abigail stays still as a fawn, eyes flicking back and forth between them as her brows crease in confusion. He doesn't know whether it's a blessing or a curse that she has no idea what's happening.

"Nothing," he insists. "It's nothing."

"That is not *nothing*. If there's a--gods," Louise spits in sudden realization. "Were you *rejected*? Tell me you didn't refuse to take a clear fucking hint--"

"I wasn't rejected!" Garret roars, only modulating his tone at Abigail's flinch. "There was just a problem with the meat, okay? I made a bad choice, but I was fixing it--"

Louise's eyes narrow, that pretty blue he used to love like chips of ice. "Seems to me like you'll be fixing it right now."

Garret reels back a step, but gods, she's right. That awareness of some hungry presence has grown into a pressure, terrifyingly close, like that night when he could have run back to the clearing. Fifteen steps, and he'd have seen them, and he's never been so close to death again in his life until now.

He just doesn't care.

"No," he says, automatic at first, but then stronger. "No." He's not going to let that happen.

"Garret." Louise clenches her jaw.

Honestly he just means to *move* her, shove her into the hall and out of his way, but Louise doesn't see it like that. Or maybe it's always been in the back of her mind that she's going to have to take care of things herself. He isn't even thinking of the hunting knife holding down a stack of bills on the counter, but when she lunges for it, he knows he has a choice.

It's a gamble at best, but maybe the hungry creature fast approaching can still be convinced to take something else in trade.

A car pulls up just as he yanks the front door open and pushes Louise out, but he doesn't give a damn who they are. If they survive what's coming, he'll worry about it then. The Mother's child is so close he can practically smell it, and while he hopes it'll be attracted by the blood he just spilled, he can't know for certain.

He retreats back to the kitchen and Abigail, who isn't screaming any more, at least. "I'm sorry," he says over her near-silent sobs. "I'm so sorry, honey, and I swear I'll explain it all if we get a chance, but...I need you to just come here, please."

She shakes her head, more from bafflement than denial. "What--?"

He wishes he could set her mind at ease, but there isn't time. He holds out a hand. "Abigail."

She isn't the only one crying as he sets his knife to her throat, but even if he's failed in every other way, he can at least do this. If his proxy is rejected again, he can still make it quick.

They both flinch as something kicks the front door in, but the words he hears fill him with hope. "Garret Jacob Hobbs? FBI!"

Gods, they might actually have a chance. That's a human voice, and it's a human man who bursts into their kitchen, gun drawn, and if the monster out there will just take its due and fucking *leave*--

He sobs into Abigail's hair as he hears the front door swing wide with a creak, the first quiet footstep on the hardwood floor. The poor, dumb bastard standing between them and it has no idea what's coming, and that popgun he's waving won't do any of them a lick of good.

He won't stand to see her suffer. He can give her that at least.

The stroke of the knife hurts worse than the bullets that slam into him, not that he expects his killer to understand. His own daughter won't understand, and that might be what hurts the most. Staggering back as he's plugged again and again, he fetches up hard against the kitchen counter and slides down, his legs turning to water beneath him.

The FBI man drops to his knees at Abigail's side, dropping his gun to frantically try to stop the bleeding. Garret didn't do a good job, but the agent's so panicked he's not making things any better. It stings, though, knowing they think this is what he wanted, that he was just killing to kill, like a rabid dog.

"See?" he says as the footsteps come closer, measured and unhurried. It won't be long now, for any of them. "See?"

And he...can't anymore, himself. It's strange. There's no cinematic fade to black, only a creeping strangeness that falls over his eyes when he blinks, like trying to stare through sunspots. He blinks again as his head lists to the side, and...he's tired. He's really tired.

And then he's nothing at all.

***

Hannibal steps into the kitchen slowly, struggling to keep the curiosity from his expression. This isn't the first time he's felt some hint of strangeness in a human, but it's only the second time he's recognized it as kin. Diluted, to be sure, barely a molecule left of what it once might have been, the product of some long-ago coupling that somehow hadn't ended in a feast. It was stronger in the woman, less so in the man. In the daughter's blood, he smells it not at all.

And yet.

She radiates with purpose to his other senses, much the same way a stag once had after his chosen mother marked it with her knife. No longer only meat, the girl bleeding out under Will's shaking hands has been branded a sacrifice, to One he knows.

With Will's insight to guide him, he takes it all in at a glance: two worshippers, one child, but the father grows attached. He tries to make up what's owed in quantity over quality, but he's wrong from the start. His gifts are no boon, only an accident of blood, and Hannibal's Mother....

His Mother doesn't *care*. Not about sacrifices made in Her name, not about Her children nor any promised to Her. Hobbs could have hidden his daughter forever if he'd had the sense to flee to the city, but now, if she lives....

"No," Will moans, despair and encouragement mixing oddly in his voice. "No, no, no...."

Hannibal stills. He could...it wouldn't be unheard of. His Mother may not care about sacrifice, but the magic is still there, ungrounded until given a direction. His chosen mother had done much the same: made an offering to an indifferent power for the hope of children. It wouldn't have worked, except the right sort of children happened along to accept the sacrifice in that power's name.

The Hobbs girl belongs to his Mother. Or any of Her blood who cares to claim her and set the focus of her fate.

Kneeling on the girl's other side, he brushes Will's hands away to apply more useful pressure, cupping her nape to better align the soft tissues severed by Hobbs' knife. He has no magic in his hands, only skill, but he believes he can keep her alive. And after....

He's never thought to be a father. He's not at all certain he'd enjoy it.

There's just something about Will Graham that makes him think of things like family, and he thinks it might be interesting to try.

End Notes

I seriously need to get better about pulling all the random stuff off tumblr. Argh.

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